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FM AMEMBASSY VATICAN

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VATICAN 000180

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DEPT FOR EUR/WE LARREA, NEA, DRL/IRF MATES

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TAGS: PTER SOCI PHUM KIRF LE IS VT

SUBJECT: LEBANON: VATICAN MONITORS AID, CALLS FOR MORE RAW MATERIALS

REF: A) VATICAN 178; B) VATICAN 179

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CLASSIFIED BY: Peter Martin, Pol/Econ Chief, Vatican, State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

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Summary

¶1. (C) Echoing a recent diplomatic note sent to the Embassy (ref a), Holy See Country Director for the Middle East Coppola told us August 29 that the Lebanese people needed raw materials for building and other reconstruction projects. Coppola described his recent trip with a papal envoy to Lebanon during which he saw a surprising unity among Lebanese of various faiths - and an increased resentment of Israel. According to Coppola, aid efforts were progressing, despite obstacles presented by the embargo of Lebanon. He said the Holy See had been pleasantly surprised by a gift of one million euros to Vatican-affiliated aid organization Caritas by the United Arab Emirates. Coppola emphasized the importance of Lebanon as an example to the region and the world that Christians and Muslims can live together, each protected by the rule of law. End Summary.

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Materials Needed

¶2. (C) Holy See Country Director for the Middle East Franco Coppola told us August 29 that the Lebanese people needed raw materials for building and other projects in order to proceed with reconstruction efforts. He said the Holy See understood the need to keep Hezbollah from rearming, but that the embargo was hindering recovery. Coppola's statements came shortly after the Vatican sent us a diplomatic note on the subject (ref a).

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Trip with Papal Envoy

¶3. (C) Coppola had accompanied papal envoy and former head of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, to Lebanon immediately after the cease-fire was

established. He described meetings with President Lahoud and Prime Minister Sinora as mainly courtesy calls since the visit was "pastoral rather than political." The two also met with Grand Mufti Sheikh Mohammad Rachid Kobbani, but had to cancel an appointment with Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri. Commenting on the conversations with these figures and others the two had met, Coppola said he had seen a surprising unity among Lebanese of various faiths. When the violence began, he said, the Christian and Sunni communities were happy at the prospect of a lessening of Hezbollah influence. But the excesses of the subsequent Israeli attacks had created some unity among Shiites, Sunnis, and Christians. Now, Coppola said, there was greater resentment of Israel, and common understanding that implementation of the UNSCR resolution should be done very carefully.

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#### Moderating Influence

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¶4. (C) Coppola also spoke of the importance of the Christian community in Lebanon as a stabilizing and moderating presence both inside Lebanon and in the greater Middle East. (Note: As noted in ref (b), Deputy Foreign Minister Parolin said much the same to CODEL Shays). While the Sunni and Shia communities do not always cooperate with each other, both have extensive experience dealing with the Christian community, he said. Coppola recounted a conversation between the former papal nuncio to Lebanon and Hezbollah leader Nasrallah some years ago. Nasrallah said he was appreciative of the Christian presence in Lebanon because it kept the country from "becoming like Saudi Arabia or Iran." According to Coppola, who served previously in Beirut, many Muslims openly acknowledge the liberalizing influence of the Christian community in Lebanon and are thankful that it discourages the advent of a more fundamentalist Islamic society.

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#### Mass Draws Crowd

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¶5. (SBU) Coppola noted the large throng (some 6,000) that attended a mass said by Etchegaray at the Basilica of Our Lady of Lebanon in Harissa. "We were surprised that after everything that happened and with the disorder still in evidence that such a large crowd would come," he said. Coppola described emotional interaction with Maronite Catholics still reeling from the conflict.

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#### Aid

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¶6. (C) We had forwarded to Coppola previously an accounting of U.S. aid for Lebanese reconstruction, and statements by the President on the subject. We pressed these points again, noting the publicity given to Hezbollah cash giveaways. According to Coppola, aid efforts were progressing, despite problems with the embargo mentioned above. He and Etchegaray met with officials from the Catholic aid organization Caritas, who noted that Christian IDPs had been slower to return to their homes than Muslims, mainly because of the location of their homes in the south. Coppola said the Holy See had been pleasantly surprised by a gift of one million euros to Caritas by the United Arab Emirates.

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Comment

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¶7. (C) As noted in ref (a), Vatican engagement on Lebanon continues at a high level. Coppola emphasized to us that the importance the Holy See places on the country is not simply concern for the well-being of its Christian population or its moderating influence. "It's more than that," he said.

According to Coppola, Lebanon is an example to the region and the world that Christians and Muslims can live together, each protected by the rule of law. Muslims in any number of other countries in the region can see this coexistence and realize that religious tolerance and peace are possible. As more Christians leave, however, Coppola worries that this example will become less and less relevant.

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